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ABSTRACT

Most theory and research on power and social influence in counseling and psychotherapy has focused on the power base and power outcome domains of Olson's (1972) framework which viewed power as a generic concept consisting of the three domains of power base, power process, and power outcome. Statistical approaches to the study of power, influence, and dominance have been developed which fall under the heading of sequential analysis. These approaches see counselor and client responses as being both causes of later events and results of earlier ones. Analyzing power and influence in counseling in terms of the relative degrees of contingency among counselor and client responses seems to be a natural approach. An alternative view to that operationalized by usual approaches to sequential analysis proposes that, rather than earlier events pushing later events into existence, later events may draw earlier events into existence. By taking this approach and computing conditional probabilities in the backward direction, the question becomes one of understanding the possible behavioral sequences that all end up at the same place. Power should not be defined in such a way as to include all causal or contingent relations between interactants, regardless of intentions, because if that were the case, then all human interaction would be a matter of power. In examining human interactions, it is important to accept the fact that human relationships, including counseling relationships, are possible apart from power struggles. (NB)

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A Critique of the Concept of "Contingency Power"

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A critique of the concept of "contingency power"

Olson and his colleagues (Olson & Rabunsky, 1972; Olson & Cromwell, 1975), although discussing power within the limited context of family dynamics, provide a useful framework within which to organize thinking about power in counseling and psychotherapy. Specifically, they view power as a generic concept which consists of three interrelated but distinct domains. The first domain refers to the potential to influence on the basis of "resources" available to the person in order to influence social outcomes. The second domain of power refers to the interaction process (i.e., message exchange) through which attempts to influence are exerted, accepted or resisted. And the third domain of influence refers to the after-the-fact conclusion about influence in terms of social consequences. The three domains of power are labeled "power base," "power process," and "power outcome," respectively.

By far most of the theorizing and research with respect to power and social influence in counseling and psychotherapy has focused on the power base and power outcome domains of Olson's framework. Strong's (1968) seminal paper on "counseling as an interpersonal influence process," the elaboration of the ideas presented by Strong and Matross (1973), and the now extensive research literature which was spawned by those papers (see e.g., Corrigan, Dell, Lewis & Schmidt, 1980), clearly reflect a "power base" orientation to power/influence in counseling.

At the same time, the work of Carson (1969) and the ideas stimulated by his text, Interaction Concepts of Personality,

(e.g., Anchin, 1982; Carson, 1973), generally reflect a "power outcome" orientation with respect to power in counseling.

"Power process" theorizing and research are fairly new to the fields of counseling and psychotherapy (e.g., Friedlander & Phillips, 1984; Lichtenberg & Heck, 1986; Lichtenberg & Semon, 1986; Tracey & Ray, 1984). Theoretically and operationally, these studies have shared the common view that the study of power and influence in counseling and psychotherapy is largely reducible to analyzing the series of discrete counselor and client acts that comprise the counseling process and by assuming that earlier acts "cause" (at least in some probabilistic sense) later ones. More specifically, the theoretical and research perspective taken with respect to "power" and "influence" as processes in these studies has been one of defining and operationalizing power/influence in terms of the degree of contingency or dependency between the responses of the interactants. Person A (e.g., the counselor) influences B (e.g., the client) -- that is, A is said to have "power" over B -- to the extent that B's responses are contingent or dependent upon the preceding responses of A.

A variety of statistical approaches to the study of power, influence, and dominance have been developed or summarized by Allison and Liker (1979), Castellan (1979), Gottman (1979), Lichtenberg and Heck (1986), Sackett (1979), Tracey (1986), and Wampold (1984). Collectively, these approaches may be referred to as methods of "sequential analysis." Operationally, sequential analysis goes something like this:

Various counselor and client responses (generally their verbal utterances) are coded as "process events" that are both the causes of later events (typically, but not always, the next event) in the process and the results of earlier ones (typically, but not always, the immediately preceding event). Earlier events "push" later ones into existence, so to speak. Conditional (or "sequential") probabilities may be computed, which indicate that if X happens, there is then a certain probability that Y will follow. These probabilities serve as the basis for the various methods of sequential analysis. To the extent that these probabilities vary systematically and reliably from the unconditional probabilities of occurrence of the various counselor and/or client behaviors (acts), the antecedent acts are said to "influence" the occurrence of other acts, i.e., they have power over those acts.

Generally reflected in these methods is consideration of the fact that "contingency power" cannot reasonably be construed as reflecting "power" without acknowledging at least the possibility that the initial actions by A (e.g., the counselor) were themselves caused by still earlier actions by B (e.g., the client); i.e., the counseling process may represent an <u>interactional</u> system. Although a theorist or researcher certainly <u>could</u> propose as a definition of power that B's actions be contingent on A, but A's <u>not</u> be contingent on B's, absolutes such as this are rarely found; and it has seemed more reasonable to argue for a definition of power in some relative terms -- that is, A has power over B if the B's actions are <u>more</u> contingent on previous actions by A than vice versa. This sort of

"relativistic" approach to contingency power had been used in a number of studies (e.g., Lichtenberg & Kobes, 1984; Lichtenberg & Semon, 1986; Tracey, 1986).

This approach, however, leaves several theoretical and methodological complications to consider. In particular, the "relativistic" approach to contingency power strongly implies an "interchangability" of positions with respect to power; i.e., if A has no power over B, then B must have power over A. It is important to note, however, that this is <u>not</u> the case. It may only mean that with respect to A, B has a measure of "freedom"--but not control or power over A. The absence of contingency on the part of one interactant does not mean the presence of power in the other.

The analysis of response contingencies as an approach to studying power and influence also seems to miss that curiously paradoxical strategy so characteristic of clients in counseling whereby persons are "in control" by being helpless or "out-of-control." Haley's (1963) classic essay on "symptoms as tactics in human relationships" is precisely a case in point. If person A can put himself in a position where his doing absolutely <u>nothing</u> is highly motivating to person B, and the reverse is <u>not</u> true, clearly A has significant influence over B.

Continuing for the moment with the notion of the relativity of power between interactants, it also seems arguable that the notion of contingency power can be meaningful only when considering at least partly open systems of human interaction. More specifically, for interactive events within the counseling

process not to be totally (and thus equally) dependent on each other, the actions of at least one of the person's must depend (at least in part) on something outside of the system. Consequently, an important consideration when determining and discussing contingency power is to remember that it depends, in part, on the observer's frame of reference. Unfortunately for researchers, as the frame of reference becomes more and more inclusive, contingency power (i.e., the power of one person over the other) eventually tends to vanish.

The preceding comments not withstanding, analyzing power and influence in counseling in terms of the relative degrees of contingency among counselor and client responses seems to have a certain sensibleness about it, and it seems a quite natural approach to the enterprise of studying power and influence in counseling--certainly it is an approach to which I have invested a good deal of my research and writing effort over the years.

But I would like to propose an alternative view to that operationalized by our usual approaches to sequential analysis: In contrast to the view that earlier events "push" later events into existence, suppose that later events draw earlier ones into existence. Now a simple, not to say innocent, view of Newtonian mechanics might make this possibility seem a bit far-fetched, but after all it is really quite common to think of people (e.g., counselors and clients) as having intentions and hence acting as if some goal is drawing them to it (Friedlander & Schwartz, 1985; Fuller & Hill, 1985; Hill & O'Grady, 1985). In this regard, Ryder (1987) and Duncan and Fiske (1979), in a curious twist of perspective (or shift in world view) have proposed the

imaginative approach of computing conditional probabilities in the backward direction; that is, when X happens, what is the probability that it was preceded by Y? In contrast to determining the possible sequences of behaviors/acts that are likely to follow the occurrence of X, the question now becomes one of understanding the possible behavioral sequences that all end up at the same place. In systems theory, this is referred to as the study of "equifinality."

The distinction in approach may be related directly to the conceptual distinction between emphasizing power (or counseling) outcomes as caused by some system properties and emphasizing an outcome as an intended state or action with important functions in the interactive system (cf. Ryder, 1987). Duncan and Fiske (1979) incorporate these two distinct approaches to analyzing interaction sequences (forward vs. backward) to distinguish between research focused on studying interaction "strategies" (forward) and interaction "rules" (backward).

Related to the notion of intentions within interactional sequences (or more specfically, counseling interaction), I believe it is also reasonable to argue that irrespective of the relative contingency of A's responses over those of B, it cannot be said that A has "power" over B unless A is able to get B to do something that is in some way favorable to A; that is, persons have "power" only to the extent that they are able to get another to behave more or less in line with their (the first person's) intentions. Power and influence are more than simply contingent responding -- although such responding may, in some instances,

reflect power/influence. For counselors to have "power" over their clients (at least in any meaningful sense of word), they must be able to get their clients to do something that the clients do not want to do. Clearly, if the client always wanted to perform actions which just happened to be what the counselor wanted, the concept of power would be moot.

Finally, but relatedly, I believe (as does Ryder, 1972) that it is generally senseless to define power in such a way as to include all causal or contingent relations between interactants, regardless of intentions, because if that were the case, then all human interaction would be a matter of power (see comments by Haley, 1976 and Bateson, Weakland, & Haley, 1976, in Sluzki & Ransom, 1976) . This seems to be the approach taken in the current "contingency power" research.

Almost anyone who has ever had a mutually happy relationship with another human being knows that not all interactions are power struggles. If we refuse to accept the happy fact that human relationships--including counseling relationships--are possible apart from power struggles, we not only make our own lives miserable, but we turn "power" into a meaningless concept.

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